

Minoan women in control?

Christine Morris

The paintings and statuettes of women excavated at the Minoan palace of Knossos immediately excited attention and speculation. But what should we conclude about Minoan society from these remarkable images? Christine Morris investigates.

Time: May 1903.

Place: Bronze Age palace of Knossos.

Event: British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans (1851–1941) uncovers a pair of stone-lined pits containing many precious objects made from faience (an early form of glass). Among them are the now famous faience statuettes of bare-breasted Minoan ‘Snake Goddesses’. Evans writes that

for beauty and interest [they] equalled, and in some respects surpassed, anything found during the course of the four seasons’ excavations

and he later chooses one of the figures as the colour frontispiece (right) for the first volume of his monumental study, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*.

Time: 13 August 2004.

Place: Olympic Games, Athens, Greece.

Event: The Olympic Games come ‘home’ to Greece. The stunning opening ceremony includes a float parade illustrating Greek history from the Bronze Age to modern times. Alongside familiar historical figures such as Alexander the Great, the more distant Bronze-Age past is vividly represented: a gigantic head of an Early Bronze Cycladic figurine splits open; graceful bull-leapers seem to have stepped down from Minoan frescoes; the statuette of a Minoan ‘Snake Goddess’ comes to life (right).

Behind the icon

These females wielding serpents have become icons of Minoan culture. But who

and what do they represent? And what can these and the many other striking images of women in Minoan art suggest about the role and status of females, mortal and divine, in Cretan Bronze-Age society? For Evans, the statuettes represented a Great or Mother Goddess, who stood at the centre of the Minoan ritual world. The snakes – two small ones held aloft by one figure, and a much larger one entwined around the body of another figure – could be seen as representing the Goddess’s power over nature. The bared breasts he explained as symbolizing the ‘maternal’ aspect of the Minoan deity. While Evans interpreted the breasts as referring to motherhood and nurturing, the modern American response to the ‘Snake Goddess’ at the 2004 Olympic Games is a sharp reminder of other possible responses to this striking image. Complaints were made about the overtly sexual imagery and in some public television broadcasts the exposed breasts (actually body paint) were ‘pixellated’ out. One late Victorian archaeologist’s mother goddess becomes a 21st-century erotic image unsuitable for prime-time television and American sensibilities!

Other scholars have argued that the figures depict not goddesses but priestesses or even snake-charmers. Minoan art does clearly suggest that there were one or more female deities, but it can also be surprisingly difficult to tell the difference between divine and mortal figures. Why is this?

A quick comparison with the contemporary arts of New-Kingdom Egypt or of later Archaic and Classical Greece can help us out here. In these traditions, individual deities are, on the whole, fairly easy to recognise: written records tell us the names of the different gods and goddesses, and in their art individuals are identifiable by specific features or symbols – for example, cow’s ears for the Egyptian goddess Hathor, or helmet and spear for Greek Athena. Both these categories of evidence elude us for Minoan Crete.

The Minoan writing system (known as Linear A) remains undeciphered, and though there is a rich language of imagery relating to ritual and religion – the double axe, bull’s head (*bucranium*), fantastic and exotic creatures such as the griffin and the monkey – they do not seem to mark

out individual divine figures. So archaeologists continue to discuss the nature of Minoan beliefs. Did they, as Evans argued, think of their divine world in terms of a Great Goddess, or were they, like their Mycenaean neighbours and the later Greeks, polytheistic – worshippers of many gods? Might they also have practised ancestor-worship, or thought of the divine as immanent in rather than transcendent over the world?

Women in Minoan society

Although these fundamental questions remain open for debate, there is no doubt about the high visibility of female imagery in Minoan art, such as the elegantly clad women on the vibrantly coloured frescoes (p. 17, bottom), or in the exquisite, miniaturist art of gold seal-rings (right). Since much Minoan art focuses on ritual it is reasonable to conclude that women played an important role in the religious life of the community.

But is it reasonable to take this a step further and suggest that elite women (remembering that these images tell us nothing of the lives of ordinary men or women) shared political power, or even took a dominant role? Evans’s own views on this were complicated; he writes of women taking the ‘high rank in society’ and of such female predominance being ‘characteristic of the older matriarchal stage of society’, yet he still envisaged a male ruler whom he termed King Minos, a ‘Priest-King’.

Debate about female participation in temporal power continues to circle around the issue cautiously, and scholars rightly acknowledge the considerable difficulties in trying to infer gender-relations and social structures from archaeological data alone.

Modern Minoans

When Minoan civilization was being uncovered in the early twentieth century the female imagery was seen as part and parcel of how fresh, modern, and European the Minoans were (and was often contrasted with the Eastern or ‘oriental’ civilizations). Evans’s excavations at Knossos revealed sophisticated architecture with columns and light wells, a previously unknown writing system, and

brightly coloured frescoes. Elements which particularly caught the public imagination included the so-called 'Throne Room', dubbed the oldest throne in Europe, and the elaborate drainage system including a flushing toilet – still a novelty in England in the late nineteenth century!

Just as flushing toilets were a novelty worthy of comment, so too we should remember that for archaeologists such as Evans and his contemporaries, schooled in Classical culture and brought up in Victorian England, the visibility and apparent modernity of the women depicted in Minoan art was even more striking and surprising than it seems today. A female figure on one fresco, for example, was soon nicknamed 'La petite Parisienne', with one (perhaps slightly enamoured) archaeologist comparing her to a habitu   of a Paris bar with her dishevelled hair and pouting red lips! In popular books too, the modernity of the imagery was discussed with enthusiasm:

the attire of the ladies was staggeringly modern. ... Evening dress, extremely low cut, puffed sleeves, skirts elaborately flounced from hem to waist, hair wonderfully frizzed and curled.

Those bare breasts...

Many aspects of Minoan society, as seen through its art, surprised early-twentieth-century society, and none more so than the exposed breasts. Though often referred to in more coy and circumspect terms as '  collet  ' or as 'open bodices', the women gathered in the Minoan frescoes evoked ideas of liberated women, perhaps a little risqu  , who mixed freely in society. This line of thought was expanded by writers such as Jacquetta Hawkes (writing in 1958) who saw female visibility and the revealing dress as symptomatic of 'accepted sexual freedom'.

Given the strong taboos in different societies concerning the covering or revealing of parts of the body, it is unsurprising that even now we find it difficult to respond to these images without bringing our own cultural values to the table. An interesting and useful parallel can be found quite close to home in seventeenth-century England where there was a fashion both for very low-cut bodices from which – it is reported – the nipples were liable to escape rather easily, and for bodices deliberately cut to leave much of the breast, including the nipple area, uncovered. Historians of the period suggest that the 'apple-like' breasts thus displayed allude to a woman's virtue, beauty, and youth, and this is a useful analogy for our Minoan palace ladies.

The power of ritual

But what of female power? In some fresco scenes women are shown on a larger scale, and as complete figures within a crowd scene with blocks of both men and women. In another scene women also seem to be in the 'front row' seats and their attention focuses on a group of women apparently dancing or perhaps performing a ritual. Female figures are very prominent too in scenes on gold seal-rings in which participants access and experience the divine through ecstatic rituals.

Classical Greece, where women lacked political rights or legal independence, exemplifies an important argument that neither the existence of goddesses, priestesses, and special female rituals nor the high visibility of women in art can be simplistically equated with female empowerment. However, it can be argued that Minoan Crete – and especially Knossos – was a very differently structured society in which religious rituals were not separate from political power but lay at the very heart of elite power structures. The palace elite maintained their status through their special access to and control over supernatural forces and through the performance of rituals, and this therefore is how they chose to represent themselves in their art. In such a society, where ritual was crucial to the expression and maintenance of power, prominent participation in ritual and privileged access to the supernatural through mystical experience are likely to have placed women together with men at the centre of power in Minoan palatial society.

Christine Morris teaches at Trinity College Dublin, where she is Leventis Senior Lecturer in Greek Archaeology and History. Together with Lucy Goodison she edited Ancient Goddesses: the myths and the evidence, published by the British Museum Press.